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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of peer relations for the experiences and texts of children in a third-grade writing workshop. Peers, as an audience for children's writing, bring with them friendship, trust, and a "social energy" that empowers authors and their writing in the classroom. Simultaneously, peers also bring with them teasing, risk, and conflict, so that the underside of peer relations must be considered, since certain children can potentially silence other children in a classroom situation created explicitly to assure that all students are heard and respected. A year-long case study was carried out in which a teacher-researcher both taught and observed third-grade writing classes based on a workshop approach. Observation showed that children tended to seek and avoid certain audiences for their writing. Furthermore, students tended to anticipate bad experiences if they were to conference with certain kinds of children. The children, thus, came to view the business of writing as being "risky." An important aspect of a writing workshop, then, must be to foster a place of safety, sharing, and low risk. Differences among the children, including status, power, and class, had prominent effects on the sharing time and on story content. Children at the top, for example, tended to write themselves into their stories more often. Overall, those who try workshops must pay attention to the immediate peer culture, and should articulate goals concerning the type of classroom environment in which children can write and learn well. (Seventeen references are attached.) (HB)

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PEERS, RISK AND WRITING

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November 23, 1992

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Introduction

Traditional writing instruction locks the student into a teacher-controlled interaction in which the teacher assigns writing, the student writes in response, and the teacher evaluates. Writing workshop and process approaches to teaching writing, made popular by educators and researchers such as Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986), attempt to disrupt this pattern in at least two ways. Through increased student control over topics and purposes for writing, the child makes the first move in an interaction sequence that places the teacher, ideally, in the response slot. But workshop approaches also break a teacher-dominated pattern by allowing and encouraging children to turn away from the teacher, front and center, to each other. In place of a traditionally unauthentic, fault-finding teacher-audience, workshops promote an authentic, meaning-finding one, and peers are a significant part of that audience.

In this paper, I explore the importance of peer relations for the experiences and texts of children in a third grade writing workshop, and examine how these children responded to the risks that confronted them as they wrote for their peers. Peers, as audiences for children's writing, brought with them friendship, trust, a 'social energy' (Dyson, 1989) that could empower authors and their writing in the classroom. Peers also brought with them teasing, risk, and conflict, and pushed back on the writing children produced. I focus on this underside of peer relations, and show how certain children silenced other children in a classroom situation explicitly created to assure that all children's voices would sound and be heard.

Background and Context

Throughout the 1989-90 school year, I taught writing five days a week in a third grade classroom using a writing workshop approach, and researched teaching and learning in the workshop as a participant observer. As a teacher-researcher, I wanted to study what happened when my students and I went about teaching and learning writing in ways that transformed typical classroom social relations and tasks. More specifically, writing workshop approaches emphasize increased student control over the work of literacy in classrooms, and I was interested in what this commitment entailed for my teaching and my students' learning and experiences in the workshop. I brought interpretive research assumptions and methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Erickson, 1986; Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983) to this work, and collected the following types of data: fieldnotes and teacher plans, audiotapes of whole-group and writing conference talk, photocopies of students' written work, and extended student interviews conducted by colleagues at the end of the school year.

I taught in a school that served a largely middle class, suburban community. Children who lived in a nearby trailer park, inhabited primarily by working class families, also attended the school. As I worked with these children across the year, I began noticing patterns of association among children that divided them along gender and social class lines. In the workshop, when given a choice, girls worked with girls, and boys with boys. And the boys and girls who lived in the trailer park were at the bottom of informal peer hierarchies of status and power in the classroom, even though several children who did not live there also occupied similar positions. This 'hidden curriculum' of the peer culture asserted itself in important ways within the official work of our third grade writing workshop, and is the focus of the larger study from which this work is drawn (Lensmire, forthcoming).

Here, I concentrate on the influence that multiple peer audiences, more or less desirable and trusted by individual authors, exerted on the experiences and texts of children in this classroom. I look especially (but not exclusively) to children on the bottom end of informal peer hierarchies for their perceptions of peers as audiences. I begin with Jessie, a child who largely rejected peers as meaningful audiences for her work (with, from what I could tell, good reason).

Jessie was the classroom's 'pariah'--Thorne's (1986) name for those girls in elementary classrooms and schools who are ostracized by peers "by virtue of gender, but also through some added stigma such as being overweight or poor" (p. 175). Jessie was not small, and she came from the trailer park. Nearly everyone in the class, in their interviews, said that she was the least popular person in the class, and the least desirable to work with. Bruce, for example, called her 'idiotic, dumb,' John said that she stunk, and Mary that she never brushed her teeth. Only a few children--Janis, Karen, Jill--said that they had worked with her in the class. The regular classroom teacher--Grace Parker--and I often intervened in verbal fights between Jessie and other children. Jessie was by no means a passive victim--she fought back (and probably started a few fights herself) with volume and sarcasm.

In her interview, Jessie said that she had only a few friends in the class--Janis and Karen (also from the trailer park)--and a few others in the other third grade class. She said she sometimes conferenced with Janis and Karen and shared her finished pieces with them, but usually she kept her work to herself. When asked, "Who do you write for?" she said, "Um, myself. I just write for myself. Or sometimes I'd write a story to somebody, and let them read it" (Interview, 5-30-90). Although she published four books across the year, she did not share her books during sharing time or in our classroom's writing workshop library. She did conference with me, Grace, and the teacher aide, often. In contrast to many of her classmates, she looked almost exclusively to adults as audiences. When asked if there were things about the workshop that she did not like, she said, "Some times I didn't like it was when Mr. Lensmire couldn't get to me [for a writing conference]. I didn't like that."

There were other children who seemed to prefer adults as audiences over peers, but most children in the workshop enjoyed and valued conferences with classmates and shared their work with the class in sharing sessions. In fact, the opportunity to conference and share their work with peers was one of the most positive aspects of the workshop for these third graders. They valued their interactions with peers.

But not just any peers. Children in the workshop sought and avoided specific peer audiences in their daily interactions in the classroom. A primary way children accomplished this was in their selection of who they conferenced and collaborated with on their texts.

In general, children worked with friends within gender boundaries. All children identified other children they did and did not want to conference with--in other words, they made inclusions and exclusions, and these differentiations were, at times, associated with social class and gender differences. Karen, for example, spoke for boys and girls in the class when she stated that "the boys like the boys, but the girls like the girls" for peer conferences (Interview, 5-21-90). In Mary and Lori's interview, Mary was quite explicit about who she did and did not want to work with: "I like working with Carol, Lisa, Marie, Sharon, Emily, Julie, and Suzanne. And I don't like working with the boys" (Interview, 5-31-90). Mary's list of girls, except possibly for Emily and Julie, is a fairly complete naming of the most popular girls in the class. She also was forthcoming about girls with whom she did not want to work, and why. Mary said that some of them had lice, they stunk, and that she did not like their 'styles' or their personalities.

Mary: Most of them, and some of them are from the trailer park and I don't like working with people who are from the trailer park. . . . Like at first I thought that Lori was from the trailer park before I went over to her house the first time.

Lori: Thanks a lot.

Mary: Well I did.

But friendship and trust (or lack of it) were the most common reasons given for their decisions, especially when children were asked why they did not want to work with certain children. Bruce, for example, did not want to work with James because he could not trust him to keep secrets about his stories. James, in turn, expressed apprehension about conferencing and sharing his texts with girls in the class because he believed they would not like his work, and assumed that they did not like him. Robert, a child from the trailer park, said in his interview that he had conferenced with Rajesh, Leon, and his 'friend William' (Leon and William also lived in the trailer park). When asked why he conferenced with them, he responded:

Robert: Well, I know they wouldn't like tell everybody, you know?

Intr: No, tell me. Tell everybody what?

Robert: Well, they wouldn't tell, they wouldn't go off telling everybody what you wrote.

Intr: Yeah. Is that important to you?

Robert: Yes it is.

Intr: Why is that?

Robert: Well, because, sometimes they laugh at you, they tease you.

Intr: What do they laugh or tease you about?

Robert: Well, what you didn't write and what they didn't write, like the same, like, they would think that theirs, theirs was better than the others. (Interview, 5-24-90)

Marie, one of the more popular girls in class, said that she did not want to read her pieces to "people who pick on me, make fun of me," because they "probably would say, that story is bad, and stuff, they'd try to make fun of stuff" (Interview, 5-16-90).

Marie's use of 'probably would say,' instead of something like, 'they said that,' is indicative of children's reports of their experiences in peer conferences. Almost no children reported bad experiences in peer conferences--most anticipated bad experiences if they conferenced with certain children. The few exceptions arose from difficulties children had working with each other on writing, not with instances of children teasing or hurting each other in conferences.

I attribute the success of peer conferences--success in terms of their being safe interactions--partly to the work Grace and I did to help children interact in positive, supportive ways. But I attribute much of their success to children's opportunities to select their first audiences in peer conferences and collaborations. The norms of our writing workshop, especially the relative freedom of movement and association, granted children an opportunity that we adult writers often take for ourselves: the chance to share our texts with friendly, trusted audiences before sending them on to, perhaps, less friendly ones.

Writing is risky, and children in the workshop experienced writing as more or less risky. An important part of what made writing risky to them was sharing their work with peers. In this, these third graders joined other writers in their ambivalent relations with audiences. On the one hand, we risk exposing ourselves and our work to criticism when we share our texts with others. On the other hand, audiences are sources of support, and we often write exactly because we want others to read our texts--sharing our work is part of a communicative transaction in written

language. Richards (1986), a professional sociologist and writer, discusses risk in these terms:

> For me, sitting down to write is risky because it means that I have to open myself up to scrutiny . . . Every piece of work can be used as evidence about what kind of a sociologist (and person) you are . . . I cannot face the possibility of people thinking I'm stupid. (pp. 113, 114)

Audiences are sources of risk in the chance that they will reject the work and the author. But audiences are also sources of affirmation, of encouragement, that cannot be tapped until something is written and shared.

> So there I am, faced with the blank page, confronting the risk of discovering that I cannot do what I want to do, and therefore am not the person I pretend to be. I haven't yet written anything, so no can help me affirm my commitment and underscore my sense of who I am. (p. 117)

Richards 'solves' this problem much like my students did in the workshop--by sharing her work, especially her working drafts, with people she trusts, people she has a common history with, who have seen "early attempts to write and think . . . and believed there was something lurking there beneath all the confusion" (p. 116). This does not remove risk--other audiences may be on the horizon, we may still worry about sharing texts even with trusted friends, may still fail to do what we had hoped in our writing--but it often helps us to write, to risk.

But we should not forget Jesse. She had decided that it was too risky to share her stories with peers. After identifying children she did not want to conference with, Jessie described how she would feel if she were forced to conference with them:

Intr: What would they do with your writing? How would you feel if you had to conference with them?

Jessie: I would feel like a jar of slime. Being sat on.

Intr: So maybe they don't treat you very well?

Jessie: Yes. No, like getting cut in half. (Interview, 5-30-90)

Later, she said that she never shared in front of the whole class because they would make her feel the same way in that situation. (She resisted numerous attempts by me to have her share with small groups of classmates, even though she often eagerly shared her work with Grace and me.) Her description of how her peers would accomplish making her feel 'cut in half' during a sharing session surprised me. I had expected her to predict verbal attacks on her work when she finished sharing a story. Instead:

> Because, cause, for some people, it, nobody would, would um, <u>answer</u>, or <u>ask them questions</u>. I know that. (my emphasis)

Jessie feared silence, a rejection expressed not with words but with no words, when there were supposed to be words; an active silence. Jessie's comments assumed aspects of the sharing session that Grace and I had worked hard to put in place. If an author asked her classmates for specific help in relation to the piece she was reading, then we expected children to respond to the author's request in their response before going on to other topics--'nobody would answer.' If the author did not set up the sharing session this way, we expected children to first talk with the author

about what they liked, and then move to questions that they had about the work--'or ask them questions.'

From the beginning, I worked to make the writing workshop, and its conferences and sharing times, a safe place for children to write and share their work. We did many activities to help children respond to each other's writing in helpful ways. Grace and I held 'peer' conferences in front of the class in which we talked with each other about our own writing; I led discussions of student texts I had placed on the overhead; we developed guidelines for response that children kept in their writing folders; and children role-played peer conferences in front of the class, which we then discussed and assessed. Grace and I were quite active, at times, in sharing sessions, both reminding children before we started that we needed to respect and support our fellow writers, and intervening during sharing sessions when children seemed unsupportive. Perhaps Jessie's fear of silence reflected her knowledge of the active role we took during sharing--she may have known we would address hurtful student comments, but she was less sure (as I am) that we could address no comments, no answers or questions.

Obviously, these teacher efforts were not enough to make the classroom a safe place for Jessie to share her texts with peers. Jessie's peers were a significant part of her not feeling safe. When asked why other people felt comfortable sharing their stories in front of class, Jessie said, "Because they have lots of friends."

Risk and Writing

One of the consequences of Jessie's relations with her peers was that her writing was never shared in the public spaces of the writing workshop--sharing time and the workshop library. Thus, most children never encountered Jessie's retelling of "Sleeping Beauty."

> Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess, and her name was Jessie. One day, she was sleeping, and she heard a noise so she got up and went upstairs to the room upstairs. When she opened the door she saw a spinning wheel.
>
> When she was spinning at the spinning wheel, she poked her finger. Suddenly she fell asleep, and everyone fell asleep too. Just then a prince came.
>
> He snuck into the castle and found the princess and kissed her. And suddenly everybody awoke and the prince became an empire.

Bruner (1990) believes that the stories we tell and write "mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (p. 52). Our stories represent a sort of compromise between how we think the world is (given to us in the 'canonical world of culture') and how we, as individuals, would like the world to be. When we tell stories, we both draw on given, cultural narratives about the world and our place in it, and manipulate and twist them in ways that express our idiosyncratic worlds.

The twists Jessie gave to a more canonical version of "Sleeping Beauty" (from the Grimms, for example) are charming, and suggest self-importance, youth, movement. Her princess is named Jessie, instead of Rosamond. Jessie, the author (as well as Jessie the princess), avoids altogether the angry witch who casts a death spell on the young princess, and the good witch who transmutes that spell to sleep. Jessie seems impatient with sleep, so instead of one hundred years of it, she has her princess 'suddenly' fall asleep, only to be awakened almost immediately by a prince who 'just then' arrived. In the Grimm version, the two live happily ever after together. Jessie's princess and prince may do likewise, but she leaves this open. Jessie, however, is not content with some sort of romantic bliss for the two. Her version ends with the rise to power of her prince: He became an empire.

Jessie's story may also be read against another 'canonical world of culture'--the peer

culture in which Jessie participated. The rift between canonical peer world and Jessie's 'more idiosyncratic' one is wide, and leaves the peer one looking anything but charming (even grim), for Jessie. In that culture, Jessie was not beautiful in the stories others told about her. She labored to avoid those who would cast spells to 'cut her in half' or turn her into a 'jar of slime.' The school year was long, and she had little chance of association (nor did she say she wanted it) with the powerful.

Jessie wrote herself and a vision of the world on the page, but others seldom heard her voice or saw her vision, at least not in the public spaces the workshop provided. Other children toward the bottom of the informal peer hierarchies, however, did assert themselves there. Janis and John, for example, were among the most frequent readers during sharing time. William had two books in the library, and Jill story, Kittens, and Janis' book of riddles and jokes, The Funny Book, were among the more popular books in the workshop library.

But there was an interesting, and ultimately disturbing, difference between the public texts of these children and the texts written by children with more status and power in the room. Children with little status in the room tended not to write themselves or their friends into their stories as characters. Children with more status did. The result was that only certain children appeared regularly as characters in the stories read by children during sharing time and housed in the workshop library--children with the most status and power in the room.

The contrast can be sharply represented with the opening pages from books written by children toward the bottom and the top of the peer pecking order. The first two pages of William's book, The Junkie House ('junkie' from 'junk,' not a reference, at least not a direct one, to drug users), are reproduced in Figure 1. The opening page of Carol's book, Spies, appears in Figure 2.

William does not name the main character in his story after himself or anyone else in the room--in fact, in this instance William's main character is referred to only as 'a person,' 'the person,' and 'he' throughout the story. In Carol's story, the main characters are named for children in the room; specifically, a group of four girls of relatively high status, including Carol herself. Three of the children's names are shortened and stylized, with the effect, for me, of suggesting characters who are tougher or more sophisticated than characters named by the full names: Car (from Carol), 'Zanne (from Suzanne), and Lis (from Lisa). Several children in interviews mentioned that high status boys and girls in the room had better clothes than other children. The attention to clothes and hair in Carol's illustration is striking, especially in contrast to William's illustration.

In general, children of high status and influence in the room appeared as characters in the public stories of the writing workshop; other children did not. Certain children were privileged in the content of the public texts of the workshop. The micropolitics of peer relations played itself out not only on the playground and behind my back, but in the writing children chose to make public in the spaces created and authorized by me, the teacher.

Why did children such as William not publish fictional narratives like Carol's, with characters named for himself and his friends? My best guess is that he and other less popular children were working with similar concerns to Jessie. They did not remove themselves as authors, as Jessie did, from the public spaces of sharing time and the library, but felt uncomfortable with associating themselves too closely with their stories by naming themselves as characters. This would not explain all their decisions. Sometimes, perhaps many times, they simply were interested in writing about other characters in other stories. Children with more status and influence, from this view, felt less vulnerable. When they wrote stories, they were more comfortable placing themselves in their stories as characters.

Or, perhaps, the children at the top were also uncomfortable in the workshop, but for different reasons. Sharing time and the library offered other children in the room numerous public opportunities to influence opinion or impress peers and teachers with their wit. Unlike the playground or the cafeteria, or before and after school, these public spaces were fairly closely watched over by teachers who would not allow these children to be shouted down or pushed

around. Perhaps the pecking order was a little more up for grabs than I have suggested, and the workshop was an open but structured place in which there was

> . . . an exchange of evaluations between authors and their readers, an exchange in which reputations are made and lost, influences wax and wane, values gain and lose currency, and the cultural pattern of a social group is sustained and evolved. (Britton, 1978, p. 17)

Children at the top wrote themselves into their texts as an assertion (and reassertion) of their importance, their rightful place at the front of the room and the focus of attention. From this perspective, they named themselves in their texts in the name of order, in defense of hierarchies that were continually threatened by upstart writers such as William, Janis, and John.

Still, in their inclusions and exclusions, in their evaluations, these public texts valued certain children more than others. And the children receiving valorization on the page were children who did not live in the trailer park, were children who already enjoyed status and influence within the peer culture, even if they had to work to keep it.

Conclusion

Workshop approaches flood classroom discourse with the voices of children, as children write, talk to the teacher and to each other, read and respond to each other's texts. Workshop advocates such as Graves and Calkins attempt to capture these very real, vigorous children on the page with a Romantic rhetoric that tends to abstract authors and texts from their social contexts (Berlin, 1988; Gilbert, 1989). Within this rhetoric, children write from their personal experience, and the choices of how and why to write, and on what topics, are assumed to be made on the basis of personal interest and meaningfulness. Children need an authentic audience so the writing is real, but workshop advocates seldom consider the ways audience can shape and constrain the writing of even young children.

For workshop advocates, the writer's struggle is the effective expression of something that is inside. They have "happily taken the personal and public aspects of literacy to consist of a one-way street: the individual finds a vehicle in writing for those deep and hidden thoughts at the core of the self and goes increasingly public with them" (Willinsky, 1990, p. 208). Lost in such a conception of written literacy is the sensitivity of authors to the social contexts within which they work (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). We forget that all of this writing is going on in schools, in which students are expected to work and teachers are expected to make sure they do; forget that peers are purposely-significant audiences for the writing done by children in writing workshops.

When I loosened the lid on student intentions and association in the room, peers became extremely important influences on student experiences and writing in the workshop. These influences were not all positive. Children evaluated and excluded each other in ways that echoed some of our society's worst sorts of divisions and denigrations. Children divided themselves up, sometimes in less disturbing, more temporary ways, in ways that allowed for changing evaluations, new friends and enemies. But they did, at any given moment and with more or less permanency, differentiate among their peers in terms of who was and who was not a friend, a desirable collaborator, a trusted audience in conferences and sharing time.

For educators and researchers who are, like me, sympathetic to workshop and other progressive approaches to the teaching of writing, my work poses at least two challenges. First, we must pay more attention to the immediate peer culture, to social relations among children and the meanings and values they assign to each other, texts, and teachers. The peer culture is an important backdrop upon which children's texts are written and given their local, particular meanings. Workshop approaches encourage teachers to know children, but this is usually thought

of as knowing individual children, as if these individuals were not caught up in relations with each other. I am not denying the need for knowledge of individual children. I am arguing that such a focus can blind us to the ways children are connected to each other, blind us to the more or less shared meanings and values children bring to their activities and texts.

Second, we must articulate goals for our workshops and classrooms that go beyond supporting individual student intentions, and include a vision of the type of classroom community in which we want our children to write and learn. Workshop approaches have aligned their goals with individual children's intentions, without considering that the ends some children pursue may not be beneficial for other children (or even themselves). There are bullies on the playground, and peer cultures maintaining divisions among children by class, race, and gender. We affirm these aspects of children's lives when we commit ourselves to supporting student intentions.

My students and I created a community within the writing workshop, and children's writing emerged from and contributed to that community. The community we created was important for the experiences and learning of the children and teachers there. I have discussed some of the disturbing aspects of that community. If, as Harris (1989) asserts, we "write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say" (p. 12), then we had better pay attention to the communities we create in classrooms.

These challenges have not been taken up in any serious way by writing workshop advocates and other progressive educators/researchers who call for the increased liberation of student intention and association in classrooms, most likely because such writers have pointed to the traditional teacher as the primary enemy of student voice in schools. The absence of Jessie and her "Sleeping Beauty" from the public spaces of the writing workshop reminds us that peers represent both promise and problem in our progressive pedagogies, and have something to say about who speaks and is heard in our classrooms.

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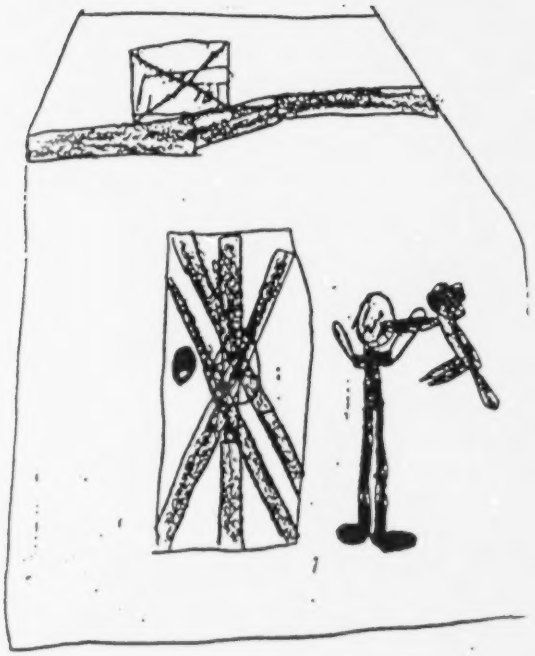
There were two black dogs and two black cats. They lived in a junkie house.



One day a person opened the door and stepped into the house. And the cat jumped on him. The person threw the cat.

Figure 1. Opening pages from William's The Junkie House.

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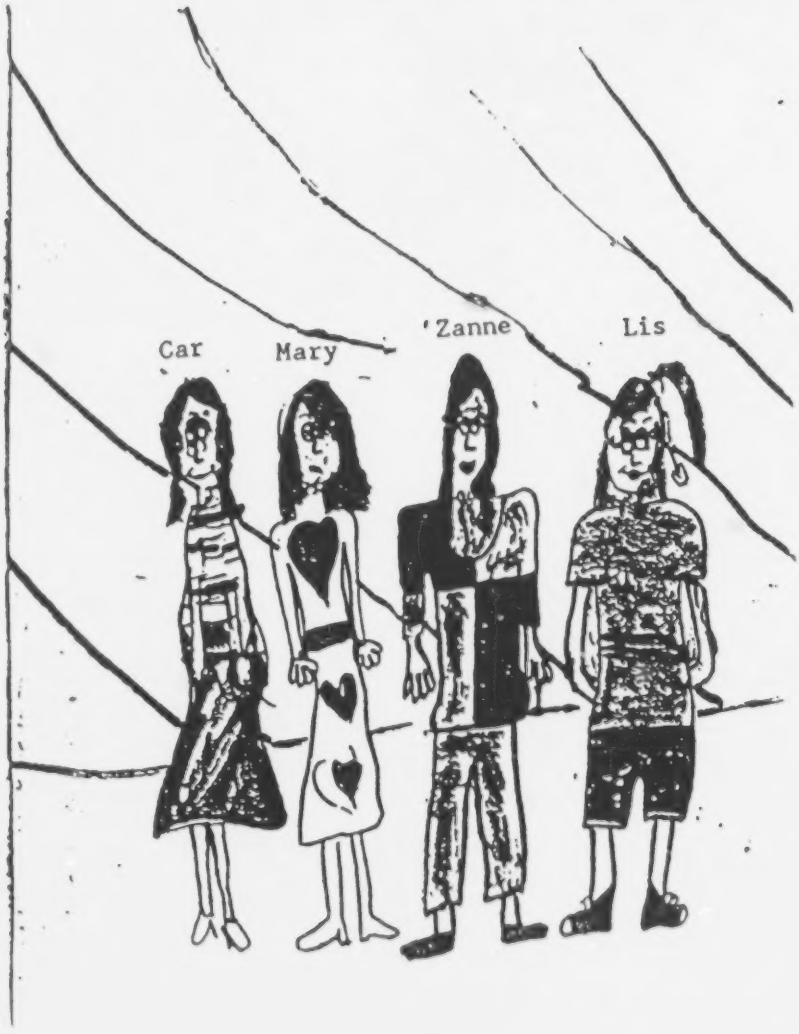

It was time for the club.
"Come on," said 'Zanne. So they
went to the door that led them to
the laboratory under the ground.

Figure 2. Opening page of Carol's Spies.

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